



September 23, 2008

Nashville leaders stand together to fight poverty

By MICHAEL CASS
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Hundreds of Nashville government, business and religious leaders joined forces Monday to start tackling one of the city's most entrenched problems: poverty.

Participants in a half-day symposium agreed to come up with a plan by next spring to reduce poverty over the next 10 years. They'll soon start working in smaller groups to address housing, health care, child care, food needs, work-force development and other issues.

Speakers and participants agreed that many organizations are doing their part in their own pockets of the city, but that strategy and coordination are lacking.

"Going it alone, we're fighting an uphill battle if there's not a comprehensive citywide solution," said Christopher Sanders, development director at St. Luke's Community House in West Nashville.

With roughly one in seven Nashville residents living below the federal poverty level, civic leaders said the problem can no longer be ignored. They said prosperity should be available to all, and large economic development projects shouldn't push low-profile residents aside.

"Poverty, I believe, is the root cause of a lot of the challenges we have," said Howard Gentry, chief executive of the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce's Public Benefit Foundation and former vice mayor of Nashville.

"If we can have a reduction of poverty's effects at the same time that we work to grow and prosper, we are not only moving forward with visible projects but also taking a larger step with the invisible challenges."

The Public Benefit Foundation and the Metro Action Commission hosted the symposium in a packed ballroom at the Nashville Convention Center.

The audience heard about success stories in Miami, where Mayor Manuel Diaz started Access Miami in 2002. That program offers financial literacy training, assistance with tax returns, access to food stamps and other benefits, and funds to help some homeowners and small-business owners.

"We partner with anybody who has the same intent we do as a municipality," William Porro, Miami's special projects administrator, said in an interview. "If you're going to call a party, you better bring something."

Solution will be difficult

Porro said Miami's poverty rate has dropped from 30 percent in 2000 to somewhere between 22 percent and 24 percent today. Nashville's rate is 15 percent, said Dan Cornfield, a Vanderbilt University sociologist.

Cornfield said Nashville's strong service economy has kept unemployment relatively low here. But

there's a downside, he said: Advancement toward "the American dream" generally happens only for those with specialized training.

Cornfield also said it's impossible to craft a one-size-fits-all solution to poverty. He cited U.S. Census data from 2007 that found 60 percent of Nashville's poor people are female, 37 percent are under the age of 16, 46 percent are African-American and about one in three are married.

Under the federal definition, a single person under the age of 65 is living in poverty if his or her annual income is less than \$10,787. For a family of four, the threshold is between \$21,000 and \$22,000.

Charles Strobel, director of the Campus for Human Development, a homeless services agency, cast the issue in a moral light. He said the common humanity of all people, born vulnerable and dependent, demands that those of means identify with the less fortunate.

"The poor of the world not only should, but must be, at the top of our list of concerns," Strobel said. "Rather than allowing riches to divide us, we can discipline ourselves to realize we are all the same."
